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## THE REORGANIZATION OF ENGLISH IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

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When one sees the results of the present scheme of teaching English in the grades, it seems evident at once that there is something defective or inefficient in the method. This defect cannot be explained by the kind of material given to pupils, neither can we trace this result to the daily methods used in teaching elementary English; but the defective result comes from the lack of organization of the work. To illustrate, here is the general outline of five lessons of work as given in a textbook which is very widely used by those who advocate the teaching of English inductively:

Lesson 1. Vacation experiences: oral narrative.

Lesson 2. Learning to speak and read well: reading verses; breathing-exercises; copying verses.

Lesson 3. A book for verses: oral explanation; written sentences; the period; writing a note.

Lesson 4. "The Apple of Discord": a picture; making a story; comparison; acting a story.

Lesson 5. Drill on Italian "a."

The material is to be presented inductively, as has been said, and the child is left to see for himself, if he can, the general principles which all the exercises contain. That is to say, there are practically no definite conclusions or rules concerning the technical side of the language which the child may use as milestones in the study of a language. Each exercise might be defended in itself, but the series as a whole is loose and leads to no clear result. The teacher may carry out the routine of each exercise well, but there is no common guiding principle which dominates and controls the instruction throughout.

The series of exercises is presented without any reference to the logical development of the language. The argument offered

in favor of this kind of exercises is that formal rules often break associations or prevent the cultivation of ideas. Such an argument sounds plausible on the face of it, but one must take into consideration the fact that logical development of a train of ideas is a very important factor in the building up of all constructive forms of expression.

Besides this lack of organization, which is clearly seen in this series of lessons, there is another very serious indictment against such exercises. Many of them introduce a great mass of wholly irrelevant matter. The pupil is thus confused and gets no clear ideas about the principles of correct expression. For example, let us use Lesson 3 of the outline of work which has already been given.

#### A BOOK FOR VERSES

Make for yourself a book in which you can copy all the verses and sentences you like. Be careful to make the book as attractive as possible.

When it is finished, bring it to class and explain how you made it. What did you consider before deciding the size? How did you fasten the sheets of paper? What sort of paper did you use for covering the boards? How did you cover and join the boards? How did you fasten the end papers? What design did you make for the cover? What did you consider in making your design?

Discuss all these questions in class, and when you have decided just what was done write sentences on the board one after another that will answer every question. Be careful to leave a broad, even margin between what you have written and the left edge of the board or paper, but begin the first line at least an inch farther to the right. Put a period after every one of your sentences. With what sort of letter will you begin each sentence?

Copy what you have written on the first page of your book, being careful about the margin and the place where you begin the first line. Let your work be very neat.

Write a note to a friend telling her why you made the book and how you are going to use it.

This lesson illustrates very well the general type of work found in these series of lessons intended for use in the entire elementary school. If one looks over the exercises again, one notices that a good part of the time is given to breathing-exercises, drills on Italian *a, e*, etc., word games, and nonsense, and that the remainder of the time for the work in English is spent on the type of lesson which has just been given. Under such conditions, is it surprising

that pupils emerge from our elementary schools with very little training either for the use of clear English in the industrial world or for work in advanced courses in the secondary schools?

The writer makes a plea for direct emphasis on the laws and forms of expression. If the lesson is recognized as a lesson in language, the class can be directed in its use of all sorts of expression.

Thus, in the explanation of the making of the book, the pupil will make various statements as to what he has done. These statements may be written on the board as follows:

1. My book is ten inches long.
2. I covered my boards with brown paper.

Some are led to ask questions as to the making of the book or as to how they shall continue the work, as:

1. How shall I join the boards?
2. Shall I write the sentence on the first page?

Now one of the books is held before the class and someone says:

1. What a nice book!
2. How beautiful this one is!

With the making and discussion of the books finished, we have four distinct groups of sentences on the board, which are to be put into the notebook. Attention is called to the first group:

1. My book is ten inches long.
2. I covered my book with brown paper.

What does the first sentence tell? What statement is made in the second sentence, etc.? As soon as the function of the sentence is made clear the conclusion should follow. It should be simple and clear-cut: A sentence that tells something or states a fact is called a declaration sentence.

Similarly, the other groups of sentences may be taken up and disposed of, making clear the mechanics in the case, so that the student may be able to use these tools skilfully in the manipulation of his language.

English work in the grades should include enough formal definition of sentences to give the pupil a clear-cut idea of the structure of the language, and should still have plenty of time and space to give the child material which will train him in thinking and develop his powers of initiative. The ability to take the initiative is very

important, but one must recognize the fact that to be able to reason by analysis is just as important; indeed, it is one of the highest forms of intellectual development. The method of presenting material to children inductively without any reference to the structure of the language, or without drill in deductive thought, results in a great loss of time and in lack of co-ordination with future work in English.

The following is an outline which the writer uses and believes to be fundamentally important in teaching the mechanics of the language:

1. Kinds of sentences, according to use and form.
2. Subject and predicate, with their functions.
3. Phrases and clauses, with syntax.
4. Parts of speech, with syntax and their relation in the sentence.

To be sure, if these formal lessons are overemphasized, then our English work beomes purely formal grammar, which is as undesirable as induction alone in the teaching of English.

As has been said, much of our elementary work in English can be and should be used to train the child in initiative and in individual thinking, and to develop a keen interest for the work which shall not be devoid of effort. Take, for example, Lesson 3, which has already been used. Material is given the child for the making of the book. Upon the presentation of cardboard, paper, paste, and string, and some explanations concerning the cutting and size, the child is set to work. Most children do this type of work with very little direction, since they are dealing with things rather than abstract ideas. Real interest is felt in this work, for the making of the book is new work for the class, and there is also a certain pride in the appearance of the book, since it is to be used by the individual who is making it. Here is a good opportunity to train initiative. A few of the ingenious ones of the class will be able to make the notebook without any direction; the majority will do the work after having some fundamental explanation; and a few, not being able to manipulate things (or not being hand-minded), will fail in this phase of the work. But there is only indirect training in English in all this. There is certainly no guarantee that improvement in handwork will result in better composition.

A great deal of work should be given for its literary value and pleasure which is outside the pale of that which has just been discussed. For example, every normal child gets a certain amount of pleasure out of memorizing Longfellow's "The Children's Hour," or from the rhythm of Tennyson's "The Brook."

Dramatization is a type of English work which may also be used with discretion in practically every grade. Lesson 4, "The Apple of Discord," will serve to illustrate. A picture is given of four children. The little boy in the picture is presenting an apple to one of the three little girls. The picture represents them as having been playing in the woods. After a study of the picture the pupils write the story of the picture, each interpreting it as his imagination leads. Some will tell of the games which these children have supposedly played and then give the conversation which took place concerning the apple. Using this material, a play can be worked out and dramatized which will train conversation and make the work alive. Indeed, a good part of the time should be given to reading, dramatization, memory work, and story-writing, but into these phases of the work should be woven logically the fundamentals of language.

Such exercises as these just described are not formal exercises in sentence-structure, but they can be given a clearly defined place in the English course because they serve specific, clearly recognized purposes in teaching oral and written expression. Their introduction into the course is in response to a definite demand for a certain type of English training. Again, the motive is part of a logical scheme of language instruction. The course will have a kind of completeness which it cannot have if it is not built up step by step for the purpose of training in language.

The greatest issue in the teaching of elementary English is not merely to present a body of material which shall prove interesting and suggestive, but to organize the work on such a basis as will give knowledge and appreciation of modes of expression and at the same time give a structural basis for future work. Failure to organize the work of the elementary grades in a clear, logical way results very often in serious loss when children go on to the high school, because eighth-grade English is repeated in part in the first

year of high school. Thus, with proper organization of upper-grade English work with an aim toward articulating it with high-school work, a year of time may be profitably saved for the pupil. To illustrate, the high schools complain of the inefficiency of pupils in recognizing simple technique and in using the simplest elements of expression with assurance. Consequently in the first year of high school a large amount of time is given to simple constructions and technicalities which could have easily been learned in the upper grades.

However, the problem is not one of stress upon formalities and technicalities of the English language, but one of reorganizing the material which we now have at hand so that no single aspect will be overemphasized, to the neglect of other important factors in the teaching of English.

If this motive is kept in mind, our elementary English will more nearly meet the requirements of the different types of students which pass out of our elementary schools.